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Study says canal can save Bay

By John Howard

SACRAMENTO (AP)--A proposal to save the fragile San Francisco Bay and delta--the source of 80 percent of California's drinking water--includes the core of a mammoth project that voters rejected 16 years ago: the Peripheral Canal.

An exhaustive, 3,500-page study delivered Monday by the CalFed Bay-Delta Program, the product of years of hearings and thousands of pages of testimony, boils down to three basic options--do a little, do some more or do a lot.

The last option by the state and federal planners would call for a 42-mile-long canal along the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta's edge. The channel would run between Hood, a tiny river town south of Sacramento, and the Clifton Forebay southwest of Byron, where giant pumps send delta water south.

The path is the same as the \$1.3 billion Peripheral Canal, a concrete-lined ditch as wide as a 12-lane freeway, approved by lawmakers but rejected by voters in an emotional 1982 referendum.

Voters in the northern part of the state overwhelmingly opposed the canal proposal, fearing a water grab by the south.

For years, environmentalists have complained that the delta's fisheries and wetlands have suffered while huge amounts of water were siphoned off for other parts of the state. They have urged limits on pumping, even as users have said the diversions are necessary to meet demand.

The latest proposal, however, would move far less water out of the delta--about 15,000 cubic feet per second, compared with 24,000 cubic feet per second in the Peripheral Canal.

It also differs from the original canal package in providing flood

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control, additional storage, water quality safeguards and better fishery protections, according to CalFed.

Less ambitious than a new canal is the second option, which would widen a critical channel near the forebay, improve and set back levees and provide a wide, shallow channel in the north.

The first option would improve the channel running into the forebay.

State and federal officials, including Gov. Pete Wilson, Deputy Interior Secretary John Garamendi and CalFed executive director Lester Snow said the report draws no conclusions about which option was best. That, they said, will be decided after a dozen public hearings statewide during the next 24 months.

Those hearings--which begin April 21 in Ontario and end May 14 in Redding--are likely to be stormy. The final decision on which plan is chosen rests with Wilson, the Interior Department and the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Both backers and opponents of the proposal focused on the potential canal as the crux of the report. Familiar battle lines were drawn between farmers and business interests on one side and environmentalists on the other.

"It's just a preliminary review we've had so far, but the third alternative best accomplishes the objectives" of protecting water supplies and restoring the delta, said Dan Nelson of the San Luis Delta Mendota Water Authority.

The Metropolitan Water District, a wholesaler that provides water to more than two dozen Southern California water agencies, agreed.

"CalFed is basically saying there are some strong technical advantages to the more controversial alternative (the canal)," said MWD's Timothy Quinn.

But the Sierra Club was sharply critical.

"CalFed should significantly increase the analysis of how much water can be saved through water efficiency," spokesman Barbara Boyle said. "The evaluation right now just looks at new supply. We should be looking at how we can be more smart using water."

For generations, Californians have debated the future of the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta, a lush region of hundreds of square miles east of San Francisco. The delta, crisscrossed by county roads and meandering sloughs, is filled with crumbling 19th century levees and rich farmland.

Most of the state's water supply pours into the delta from rivers such as the Sacramento, San Joaquin and Mokelumne, fed by snowmelt from the Sierra Nevada.